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## Proper 21 • James 5:(1–12) 13–20

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The book of James is a collection of exhortations written to encourage Christians to live out their Christian identity in their daily lives until Christ returns. Due to the nature of the book, James feels more like a collection of proverbs than a narrative that flows from beginning to end. A common fear when preaching on a text from the book of James is that it may be heard only as condemning law. Because of this, a sermon from James must emphasize the grace-based identity of the hearer so the exhortations are taken as instructions for Christian living and not as works righteousness.

Chapter five is a prime example. There are at least three distinct topics in this pericope: a warning to the rich, exhortation for patience in suffering, and the role of prayer in Christian life. The pericope suggests one might focus on the first two topics in verses 1–12 (warning to the rich and patience in suffering) or the third topic in verses 13–20 (the role of prayer). While it is possible to lump them together, each topic warrants its own treatment.

In the context of James, the first exhortation (Jas 5:1–6) can feel like it does not fit the flow of the text. The sudden seeming shift in audience emphasizes the proverbial nature of the book as a whole and differs from the two that follow. Scholars debate who

James is talking about, but based on James 1:6, I am inclined to think James is speaking about the rich who are oppressing Christians with a description of the Christian at the close of the verse. The attitude of the Christian, the righteous man, in light of the oppression he experiences by the rich is clear. While the rich oppressed and even murdered the righteous, the righteous did not resist. It might be tempting to preach about the sins of wealthy Christians, but I believe focusing on the response of Christians to the oppression of the rich is more in line with the overall theme of James as highlighted in the section on patience in suffering that follows.

The second exhortation on patience in suffering (Jas 5:7–12) is likely the easiest of the three sections to preach. In this section, James encourages Christians to endure suffering patiently in light of the imminent return of Jesus. He encourages a steadfast faith that resists the temptation to grumble, recalls the faithful examples of the saints, and displays an integrity that allows others to take us at our word as we await Christ's return.

The third exhortation (Jas 5:13–20) to pray emphasizes the importance of prayer in the daily life of a Christian. Prayer in times of suffering, joy, praise, sickness, confession, and need is seen as a powerful mark of a righteous follower of Christ. Prayer is not only a cry of faith to God or a therapeutic practice; it is an essential quality of the Christian life. Included in verses 19–20 of this third exhortation is a statement that emphasizes the importance of the community of faith in assisting fellow believers in remaining on the path of truth until Christ comes again. In this section, we learn that James's exhortations are not only explicating Christian identity, but are also designed to protect followers of Christ from wandering away from the faith.

Regardless of which section of the pericope one selects, all three share the following themes: we are to live out our identity in Christ even in the face of suffering, we are to assist our brothers and sisters in staying true to the faith, and in light of James 1:2–4, suffering works to test and refine our faith until Jesus comes again. If one desires to discuss all three sections in one sermon, using these three themes as a sermon structure is one possible way. Another way to address all three sections is to consider James 5:1–6 as a contextual description of suffering, James 5:7–12 as the call for patience in suffering, and James 5:13–20 as the role of prayer in suffering.